DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 347 UD 032 560

TITLE	Invest in Kids--Californians Support New Approach To Prevent Youth Violence. Living Well, Spending for Health. Policy Notes.
INSTITUTION	California Center for Health Improvement, Sacramento.
SPONS AGENCY	California Wellness Foundation.
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	6p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adolescents; *After School Programs; *Delinquency; Elementary Secondary Education; Juvenile Justice; Parent Child Relationship; Policy Formation; *Prevention; Public Opinion; Public Policy; Social Services; Surveys; Tables (Data); Taxes; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS	*California

ABSTRACT

This "Policy Note" highlights new information about youth crime and prevention that suggest that California has a unique opportunity over the next several years to invest in new preventive approaches for reducing youth violence. Several surveys by the California Center for Health Improvement (CCHI) have documented that Californians share a vision of the aspects of their communities that need major improvements. Safe neighborhoods lead the list of priorities for virtually all ethnic and income groups. In addition, Californians want to prevent youth from becoming involved in violence and crime. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), the first national study of adolescent health that measures a number of variables related to adolescent lives, surveyed 90,000 students in secondary school and interviewed more than 20,000 teenagers and 18,000 parents. The major research finding of this study is that, independent of race, ethnicity, family structure, and poverty status, adolescents who are connected to their parents, their families, and their school communities are healthier than those who are not. Another national study, "After-School Crime or After-School Programs," compiled from Federal Bureau of Investigation data, asserts that juvenile crime results from too little adult supervision and the decreased availability of after-school activities. A study in Orange County (California) has shown the effectiveness of an intervention that used an array of social services to assist targeted youth and their families. CCHI data show that Californians believe that money matters and that what money is spent on is critical. Strong majorities of voters consider community-based violence prevention programs to be effective and they are willing to allocate public tax dollars to fund them. Voters are also willing to create a state-level violence prevention authority to fund such projects. The challenge for policy makers and community leaders is to identify prevention strategies that work in funded programs. (Contains five tables and eight references.) (SLD)

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Invest in Kids- Californians Support New Approach to Prevent Youth Violence.

Living Well/Spending for Health Policy Notes

California Center for Health Improvement

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Invest in Kids — Californians Support New Approach to Prevent Youth Violence

The Challenge

Compelling new research findings coupled with recent surveys of public opinion about youth crime and prevention suggest that California has a unique opportunity over the next several years to invest in new *preventive* approaches for reducing youth violence. Recently, intense public debate has taken place about youth crime and the future of the juvenile justice system. This debate has stimulated the development of a new and better base of information about juvenile crime. This *Policy Note* highlights some of this new information including:

- data about the prevalence of youth crime and characteristics of youth at most risk for engaging in violence;
- findings related to the effectiveness of violence prevention programs; and,
- surveys of the opinions of Californians about youth violence and prevention which indicate the public wants policymakers to replace the "wait for crime" approach with one that gives greater emphasis to preventing violence *before* it happens.

Viewed together, this data articulate an important new trend — both researchers and the public support greater investment in children as a means to prevent youth violence.

Seeking Healthier Communities

Several surveys by the California Center for Health Improvement (CCHI) have documented that Californians share a common vision of what aspects of their communities need major improvements. Safer neighborhoods — in addition to better job opportunities — lead the list of priorities for virtually all ethnic and income groups (table 1). People want to feel safe (1).

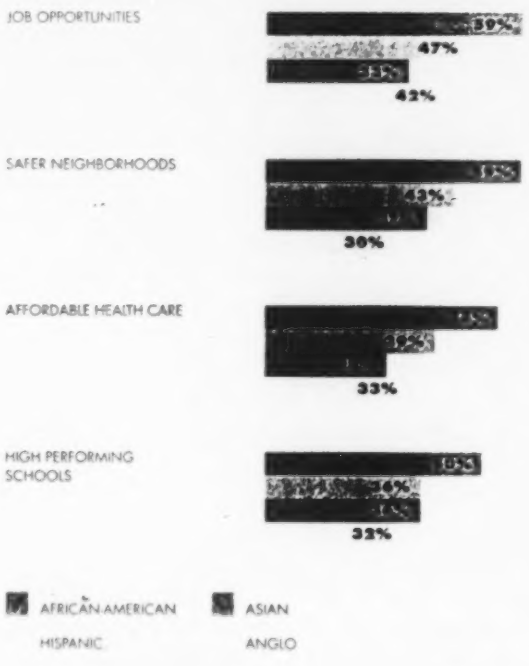
In addition, Californians want to prevent youth from becoming involved in violence and crime. Violence is a public health problem of epidemic proportion in California. In fact, it is the leading cause of death for youth under the age 19 (2).

A recent survey among California voters demonstrates that the voting public places a high value on prevention. By a margin of five to one, voters choose to invest in prevention over incarceration (table 2, page 2). More than three-fourths believe that it is never too late to help a youth who has become involved in violence and crime (table 3, page 2).

TABLE 1

Seeking Healthier Communities

Californians who say their cities need to make "major improvements" in:



Source: *Getting Involved Survey*, December 1995 – January 1996 (1)

New Research Findings

"Connections That Make a Difference in the Lives of Youth." The first results of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). The Add Health study is the first national study of adolescent health designed to measure the social settings of adolescent lives, the ways in which adolescents connect to their social world, and the influence of these social settings and connections on health. The school-based study surveyed 90,000 students in grades seven through 12 and interviewed more than 20,000 teenagers and 18,000 parents. Because of the sheer volume of data collected, a complete analysis of the survey is expected to take a decade or more.

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TABLE 2

Voters Choose Prevention Over Incarceration

The population of male teenagers, who statistics show commit the most crimes, is expected to increase 25 percent in the next 10 years. In response to this statement, which of the following statements comes closer to your opinion?

OUR BIGGEST PRIORITY IS TO INVEST IN WAYS TO PREVENT KIDS FROM TAKING WRONG TURNS AND ENDING UP IN GANGS, VIOLENCE OR PRISON
82%
OUR BIGGEST PRIORITY IS TO BUILD MORE PRISONS AND YOUTH FACILITIES AND ENFORCE STRICT SENTENCES TO GUARANTEE THAT THE MOST VIOLENT JUVENILE OFFENDERS ARE KEPT OFF THE STREETS
13%
DON'T KNOW / NO ANSWER
5%

Source: *Resources for Youth Survey*, February – March 1997 (8)

The first findings from the analysis released in September, 1997 (3) provide a foundation for understanding risk and protective factors in the lives of American youth.

The major research finding is: independent of race, ethnicity, family structure and poverty status, adolescents who are connected to their parents, to their families, and to their school community are healthier than those who are not. These teens are less likely to use drugs and alcohol, attempt suicide, engage in violence or become sexually active at an early age (4 p.16).

The findings also provide a snapshot of young people who are at greatest risk for unhealthy behavior. The study measured emotional distress, suicidiality, violence, substance use and sexual behaviors. Regarding violence, the study found the following youth to be at *most* risk for engaging in violence (4 p.11):

- Welfare recipients;
- Younger teens;
- Urban youth;
- Native American teens.

National Report: Fight Crime: Invest in Kids
A national crime-prevention group — comprised of police, prosecutors and survivors of crime — also issued a youth-focused report in September, 1997. This report, *After-School Crime or After-School Programs*, asserts that juvenile crime stems from too little adult supervision and decreased availability of constructive after school activities (5). The report was compiled from Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) data in eight states (not including California) which track juvenile violence.

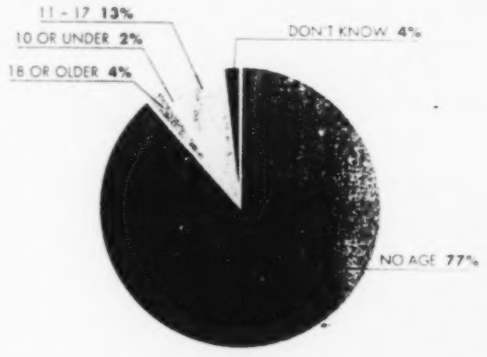
One major finding is that almost two-thirds of all juvenile crime takes place between 2 p.m. and 8 p.m.

California Study: Orange County
Since 1985, Orange County has studied youthful offenders and concluded that eight percent are responsible for *more than half* of all juvenile crime (6). It also established a profile of those dangerous youths.

TABLE 3

It's Never Too Late

Do you think there is an age at which it is too late to help a young person who has gotten involved in violence and crime?



Source: *Resources for Youth Survey*, February – March 1997 (8)

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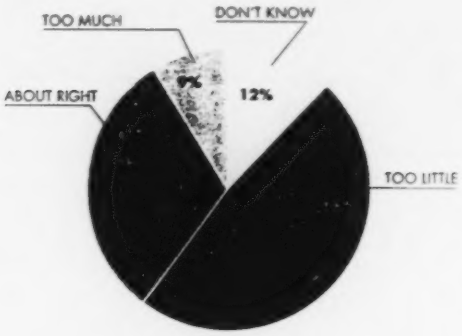
TABLE 4

Spending for Health Improvement

Do you think that the amount spent by government and other public and private groups to improve health in your community is too little, too much or about right?



Source: *Spending for Health Survey*, September – November 1996 (7)

It said most are:

- ages 13 or 14;
- from dysfunctional or abusive families;
- active drug or alcohol users;
- doing poorly in school; and,
- friends with similarly troubled youths.

Based on this data, Orange County targeted a small segment of that high-risk population with an intensive intervention effort aimed at diverting their lives from crime. The program used an array of social and support services — such as drug treatment, school counseling and mental health services — to assist the targeted juvenile and all members of the youth's family.

The outcome: This year, officials report a 50 percent drop in juvenile arrests among the targeted population. A state-wide program, modeled after this one, was launched in August, 1997. However, the funding level, $3.6 million, is less than the $10 million originally earmarked for the program.

New California Public Opinion Survey Data

CCHI's *Spending for Health* report shows that Californians believe that money matters and what dollars are spent *on* is critical (7). They believe *too little* is spent to improve community health (table 4).

This belief is also supported in a separate survey of California voters. Results of a statewide survey show that California voters are willing to allocate public tax dollars to fund violence prevention strategies (8). Specifically, these results show that the vast majority of Californians believe it is time to emphasize prevention of youth violence rather than build more prisons and juvenile facilities. Voters were told that the population of male teenagers, who statistics show commit the most crimes, is expected to increase 25 percent in the next ten years. In response to this statement, voters were asked to identify what the biggest priority should be: "invest in ways to prevent kids from taking wrong turns and ending up in gangs, violence or prison" or "build more prisons and youth facilities and enforce strict sentences to guarantee that the most violent juvenile offenders are kept off the streets." Eighty-two percent selected prevention (table 2, page 2).

While crime and violence is a top concern of California voters, and they believe that juvenile violence has increased over the past few years, three-fourths of respondents maintain that there is no age at which it is too late to help a youth who has gotten involved in violence and crime (table 3, page 2). This finding reinforces previous research that revealed that people think adult and juvenile perpetrators should be handled differently. Rather than looking to strictly punitive measures, Californians support alternative measures for youth. They are willing to invest in intervention and prevention programs that prevent violence *before* it happens.

The survey specifically asked respondents to evaluate the effectiveness of local programs designed to reduce youth violence and whether those programs should be funded by public tax dollars. The results show that strong majorities of voters consider community-based violence prevention programs to be highly effective and would be willing to allocate public tax dollars to fund them. Some of the programs tested throughout the state include teen courts, beacon/second shift schools and mentoring programs (8).

In addition, voters are willing to create a state-level violence prevention authority to fund community-based youth violence prevention projects. Strong majorities support a variety of funding options for the authority, including allocating taxes already paid (73%), dedicating a percentage of property taxes (66%), and shifting money from the new prison building budget (61%) (table 5, page 4).

Looking Ahead

CCHI: Based on new public opinion data, CCHI will launch a new eight-part series of publications on children's health, "Growing Up Well," in January, 1998. Topics include: children's health insurance, preventing alcohol abuse, preventing juvenile delinquency, adolescent risk-taking, preventing tobacco use, mental health, early child development, and supports for parents.

Resources for Youth: Through an automated fax-on-demand line, Resources for Youth provides up-to-date information on violence prevention and tools to help promote California's potential to reduce youth violence. For immediate access to materials and a violence prevention "Activity of the Month," please call 888 329.4409.

Interested? For more information on these initiatives, please call (see "About CCHI and Resources for Youth," page 4).

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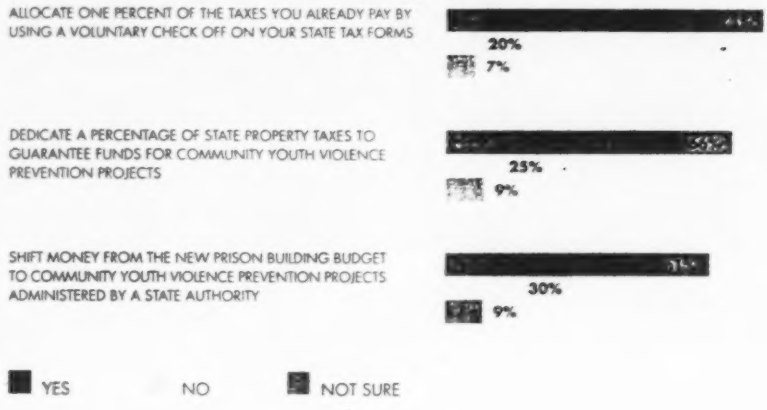
What Are the Health Policy Implications?

The resources dedicated to institutional systems which manage youthful offenders in California and care for crime victims are significant. At the same time, significantly more can be done to invest in strategies which improve the conditions and overall health of communities where juvenile crime and violence are most pronounced. Californians agree that, for the most violent offenders, programs of juvenile incarceration are a necessary component for assuring community safety. However, an important continuing policy issue is the role prevention programs and strategies can play to keep youth "on the right track." Helping youth stay in school, stay out of trouble, avoid risk-taking behaviors, and receive needed supervision and guidance from strong adult role models are elements of preventive strategies which offer promise for improving the health of youth in California.

TABLE 5

Voters Willing to Fund Youth Violence Prevention Projects

Would you be willing to do each of the following to fund a state-level agency or authority that would distribute money to community-based youth violence prevention projects?


ALLOCATE ONE PERCENT OF THE TAXES YOU ALREADY PAY BY USING A VOLUNTARY CHECK OFF ON YOUR STATE TAX FORMS
20%
7%
DEDICATE A PERCENTAGE OF STATE PROPERTY TAXES TO GUARANTEE FUNDS FOR COMMUNITY YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROJECTS
25%
9%
SHIFT MONEY FROM THE NEW PRISON BUILDING BUDGET TO COMMUNITY YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROJECTS ADMINISTERED BY A STATE AUTHORITY
30%
9%
YES
NO
NOT SURE

Source: *Resources for Youth Survey*, February – March 1997 (8)

The public voices strong support for increased investment in community-based services and preventive programs to support youth and prevent youth violence. Similarly, research indicates programs designed to strengthen the connections between youth and their parents, schools and communities offer significant potential value. Every community has the potential to prevent youth violence. The challenge to community leaders and policy-makers is to identify prevention strategies that work and develop consensus that future investment in these strategies is a valued component of California's efforts to reduce youth violence and improve community safety.

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7. California Center for Health Improvement. (1997). *Spending for Health*. Sacramento, CA. The Field Institute surveyed a representative sample of 4803 California adults September 30 – November 5, 1996 on behalf of CCHI.
8. Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin and Associates in coordination with The Tarrance Group conducted a series of five regional polls among California voters on behalf of Resources for Youth. A total of 1,700 interviews were completed February to March, 1997.

About CCHI and Resources for Youth

This *Policy Note* was developed collaboratively by CCHI and Resources for Youth.

The California Center for Health Improvement (CCHI) is a non-profit, non-partisan health policy and education center. This *Policy Note* was developed in support of CCHI's work as a grantee of The California Wellness Foundation's Health Improvement Initiative.

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Resources for Youth is a public education campaign funded by a grant to Martin & Glantz LLC from The California Wellness Foundation.

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